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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Cox Committee for English (England) proposals and suggests some theoretical and practical approaches to teaching about the exchange of information through a media education perspective, especially news reporting. Findings are based on research into approaches to media education presented in a series of broadcast radio programs for teachers in England. All newspapers have a common interest in protecting their position or editorial stance in the market; journalists learn quickly to adapt their work to the requirements of their newspaper. Technical features and conventions of specific media define their typical styles of presentation, although survival depends upon how effectively they can communicate with readers. The distortion of society's information base offers a threat that is recognized by Cox. It is suggested that media education by English teachers is a crucial element in providing strategic defenses against this distortion by enlarging pupils' critical understanding of how messages are generated, conveyed, and interpreted in different media. (Contains nine references.) (NAV)

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ENGLISH, MEDIA AND INFORMATION IN THE POST-COX ERA

Andrew Hart

The proposals of the Cox Committee for English: 5-16 (DES for HMSO, 1989) give the study of media a welcome prominence. As well as offering no less than six Statements of Attainment which refer explicitly to media work, they constantly suggest the use of media materials and invoke media education approaches as part of every English teacher's practice. At several notable points, they recognise that "the kinds of question that are routinely applied in media education can fruitfully be applied to literature" [7.23] and that "media education has often developed, in a very explicit way, concepts which are of general importance in English" [9.9].

What are these questions and concepts? The main concepts are helpfully listed by Cox as "selection (of information, viewpoint, etc.) editing, author, audience, medium, genre, stereotype, etc." [9.9]. The questions resolves themselves into "who is communicating with whom and why; how has the text been produced and transmitted; how does it convey its meaning?" [7.23]. (All of these would be very useful questions to address to the Cox proposals themselves!)

Teachers of the more specialised form of media education, usually known as media studies (recognised by Cox as having its own academic integrity as a timetabled subject outside the National Curriculum [9.4]), will be familiar with the questions and concepts listed in Cox. The approaches which they suggest to the study of texts already figure strongly in the current GCSE and A-Level Media Studies syllabi. What is new is the expectation of their normality and that they should begin as early as primary education. This is largely a result of the determined efforts of the British Film Institute (Bazalgette, 1989), whose attempts to define media education have positively influenced the Cox proposals:

"Media Education ... seeks to increase children's critical understanding of the media ... (It) aims to develop systematically children's critical and creative powers through analysis and production of media artefacts ... Media Education aims to create more active and critical media users, who will demand and could contribute to a greater range and diversity of media products." [9.6]

Media education from 5-16 is firmly located by Cox within "the exploration of contemporary culture" [9.4]. It is not surprising then to find that it is being offered an arranged marriage with information technology. Media education does, indeed, offer useful approaches to the study of new (as well as old) technologies. This conjunction is, therefore, promising, provided that we do not mistakenly identify information technology as limited to the use of computers. We need to focus on a range of technologies which are used to collect, organise, process and circulate information.

This discussion suggests some theoretical and practical approaches to teaching about the exchange of information through a media education perspective. It is based on my research into approaches to media education in a series of broadcast radio programmes for teachers (Hart and Cooper, 1990). In the space available here, it will only be possible to glance at one area of work. I have chosen to focus on news reporting, because of its familiarity for most English teachers, because of the availability of a wide range of teaching resources in this area and because it can provide a model for examining the fundamental questions about who? what? how? and why? raised by Cox.

The circulation of information relies of 'facts' as its raw material. As social beings, we are surrounded by 'facts'. We receive them, seek them, exchange them, check them and act upon them. At the same time, we are all reporters and producers of 'facts'; we have all learned to handle large amounts of data in systematic ways. Yet we also rely on second-hand messages about the world beyond our social experience. These messages do not reach us innocently. The facts they report are not merely random fragments which we capture and store. They come in patterns which are largely defined and packaged for us by the mass media.

The media's criteria of newsworthiness operate together as a framework for what is reported. As a result, there are information gaps. Some events are under-reported because they do not fit into the framework. Sometimes the reasons are related to geography, sometimes to dominant cultural assumptions. Many stories never make the national headlines, while others are reported because the relevant sources are routinely monitored. As Hall explains:

"of the millions of events which occur every day in the world, only a tiny proportion ever become visible as 'potential news stories'; and, of this proportion, only a small fraction are actually produced as the day's news in the news media" (Cohen and Young, 1981, p. 234).

Who is communicating with whom and why?

There is a simple view which seeks to explain mass communication as the expression of powerful economic interests. Ideology is seen as the direct product of ownership and control. Ownership does, indeed, allow privileged access to the means of communication. Some readers of British newspapers expect their papers to represent particular political positions, while others are unaware of any position at all behind the stories they read. Few readers expect the sort of impartiality which broadcasters claim television and radio provide. The ideas expressed in particular newspapers are bound to relate to their basic economic interests.

Andrew Goodwin's *Battle of Osgrove* simulation (Goodwin, 1988) is a reworking of the 'Battle of Orgreave' in 1984 (Masterman, 1986). It explores how facts are adapted or discarded to suit the political persuasions of reporters, editors and the papers they work for. Sarah Hammett used the simulation with second-year sixth-form students doing A-Level Communication Studies at Totton College in Southampton. The lesson showed that students were able to use political positions as a filter for the stories they edited. The persuasions of the different papers showed through clearly. The students were also able to point to textual elements in other groups' reports which showed their political positions. They understood what they were supposed to be doing during the simulation, enjoyed doing it and responded well to the pressure of strict deadlines and new information feeds. It was a highly participatory and practical lesson, in which the students produced tightly written and carefully thought out material. Their comments on their own work and that of other groups showed a real understanding of the editorial processes, putting into practice concepts with which they were familiar from earlier in their course.

The lesson also raised a number of problems related to the simple facts versus opinions distinction. Simulations are always limited. They always over-simplify and exaggerate for the sake of clarity. They can never reproduce the real conditions in which reporting occurs. Students are not professional journalists and can only follow limited stereotyped models of how journalists think and work. There is a danger that this approach to facts can encourage cavalier decisions, which are even more

irresponsible than the worst excesses of tabloid reporting. There is also a danger that reporting comes to be seen as a conspiracy to deceive.

But there is a more basic problem. The 'Osgrove' simulation allows students to make a naive distinction between an objective world of events in which things happen and a subjective world of interpretation through which events are filtered. In the lesson, one of the students contrasted "what actually happened" with "the imagination of the reporter". This dualism is based on a naive view of media. It suggests that political positions can somehow be side-lined so that they do not interfere with responsible reporting and that there is a possibility of unbiased reporting to which media should aspire. Some students claimed that they were "trying to make it ... as unbiased as possible". They did not recognise that media are always selective or that personal experience is an unreliable criterion of truth.

This example suggests that students may have a problem in understanding how the unstable data of personal experience are refracted rather than reflected by the media. The world which media create is selected, edited and represented by people according to professional codes, in specific forms, for particular audiences. What media education can do is to show how these processes work. Bias may be relatively easy to detect in written journalism, but selection occurs in every form of reportage.

There is a whole range of factors which affect the way the media report what is happening in the world and the opinions they express (like editorial policies, journalistic practices, legal constraints and government restrictions). It is not so easy to unravel how these different factors interact with each other. The relationship between media content and economic interests is complex, dynamic and constantly shifting. Two general factors are, however, clear:

- *ownership of the British press is concentrated in the hands of a very few proprietors*
- *newspapers are part of larger conglomerates or associations of companies with a wide range of other financial interests*

These features mean that newspapers are subject to the basic need to be profitable in the long term, like any other commercial enterprise. If they do not sell enough copies at the right price, they will not be financially viable. But does this mean that what they print is controlled, in the short term, by the same profit motives? Does *The Times Educational Supplement* bear the ideological imprint of Rupert Murdoch in the same way as *The Sun*? The fact that it does not is because there are limits to what readers will tolerate.

What all newspapers have in common is an interest in protecting their position in the market. As well as attempting to maximise sales, they also need stable conditions. Such large sums of money are involved in setting up and running a mass circulation national newspaper that it is very difficult to set up a new paper, especially when established ones use spoiling tactics to protect their own positions. Most new ventures have failed or been taken over. The left-of-centre *News on Sunday* folded after only a few issues in 1988 and Eddie Shah's SDP-supporting *Today* went right wing when it was relaunched by Rupert Murdoch's *News International* group.

Some owners are highly interventionist and may dictate their paper's editorial stance. They may also use them as vehicles to promote or protect their commercial interests. A notable example is the promotion of *Sky TV* by newspapers in Rupert Murdoch's *News International* group. At the same time, stories which could damage

the other financial interests of a corporation are unlikely to be covered in related papers (Lonrho's *Observer* has provided several good examples of this).

The long-term economic goals of newspapers have to be translated into news stories through the organised process of news production. Journalists learn very quickly by experience to adapt their work to the requirements of their paper. The news values embedded in particular stories are partly a result of routine working practices and expectations.

How has the text been produced and transmitted?

Popular newspapers devote more of their space to photographs than they do to text. Some readers may well be able to recognise editorial angles in written texts, but may take photographs for granted. They may seem innocent, but are most suspect precisely at the point where they make their strongest claim to 'capture' or document rather than recreate reality. When words and pictures are combined as *news photographs* (often with accompanying captions), there is a powerful conjunction of two systems of selection. Roland Barthes argued that "pictures are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke" (Barthes, 1972). But that meaning comes from a series of practical and professional actions at various stages of production. The decisions made (consciously or unconsciously) affect the final outcome at every level of the process. Stuart Hall (in Cohen and Young, 1981) offers a multi-level account of how it works. The first four levels of selection occur in the production of any still photograph. But, at the fifth level, the whole apparatus of news production becomes crucial, for here the routine practices, assumptions and professional judgements of designers and editors come into play.

1. *Technical*: constraints are imposed by the technical features of cameras and film (e.g. film speed, light levels, lens range).
2. *Formal*: codes derived from normal ways of seeing enable readers to recognise objects from their everyday world. These codes are basically rules of equivalence, which allow us to translate a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional reality. They also involve translations of colour, size and contrast.
3. *Composition*: space within photographs is arranged according to artistic/photographic conventions. These determine how foreground and background, centre and margins interact, what different degrees of focus, different camera angles and size of shot mean.
4. *Expression*: gestures, expressions and relationships between elements within photographs are interpreted according to variable cultural codes.
5. *News Value*: people or places within photographs are recognised as particular ones already known to readers. A radical closing down of the range of possible meanings occurs at this level, because of the specific identifications made and their currency.
6. *Frame Manipulations*: the processes of cropping, retouching and enlarging all give emphasis to particular readings, which have a privileged status because of their news value.
7. *Page Integration*: codes of sequence and page layout place the photograph according to the relative importance assigned to the story it refers to.
8. *Anchorages*: captions and headlines are added, which finally 'fix' the dominant readings of the photograph.

Hall's scheme offers a powerful framework for tracking the different stages of selection and editing which news photographs go through. Once we accept that all media processes are inevitably selective, we can shift our focus towards *how* they select and *with what consequences*. A key concept here is *representation* and it is worth untangling some of its different senses. Richard Dyer has explained four of the main ones for us (Lusted and Drummond, 1985, pp.44-45):

1. *A selective **representation** of reality:*
This is obvious in newspapers, where the form is completely different from the events reported, but less so in television serials, which often succeed in creating the illusion of a transparent window on a world which has a similar time-frame and rhythm to our own.
2. *A typical or **representative** version of reality:*
Media often use stereotypes to typify particular social groups as a form of shorthand. How do the media represent, say, gender or race?
3. *The process of speaking on behalf of or as **representative** of a particular position:*
Whose views are being put forward in particular messages; whose voices are being heard?
4. *The meanings which media messages **represent** for audiences:*
What do readers bring to messages which affects how they interpret them?
What actual sense is made when particular messages are understood?

All media *represent* the world in these ways. In reporting on the world, they make particular, recurrent senses of it and we can begin to unravel these senses by asking what kind of representation is being offered.

How does it convey its meaning?

The media select and process facts for us so systematically that they affect the way we interpret what they are saying and the meanings we construct. News reporting relies on a range of documentary devices to distinguish factual information from opinion. On television, features like Standard English, smart clothing and electronic office hardware are often used to suggest that we are in the presence of responsible and reliable reporting. According to this simple view, facts are things which have happened and fiction is something which has been made (up). Facts are "out there" waiting to be reported and reflected on. But this distinction is hard to sustain if we start asking some basic questions, such as: When does an event become a fact? Can facts exist in isolation? Do facts make sense without any context? Which facts have been selected? Which facts have been ignored? As one senior television executive reminds us: "Merely to recount the figures is to obscure the meaning" (Hargreaves, 1989, p.19).

Journalists are social beings, as well as professionals. They have their own views and values, which are reflected in what they write. They are also tuned in to dominant social values. They recognise a range of cultural and social norms which form a relatively stable consensus. At the level of *writing*, journalists are more concerned with the status of their stories amongst potential readers than with the views of proprietors or long-term corporate demands. They may exert relative autonomy in their writing, but they are working within a system which constrains them. The requirements of those who exercise and delegate power still dominate how they make sense of events and facts through words and pictures. Yet, in spite of all these

constraints, some journalists and newspapers claim to be independent. This can be the case where editors and journalists are able to exert more control, as in the case of *The Independent*.

We have looked at how some of the technical features and conventions of specific media define their typical styles of presentation. All this may suggest a rather monolithic and manipulative system in which there is little freedom either for producers or consumers of information. What role then do audiences play in the cycle of media communication and how powerful are they?

The survival and success of the media depend ultimately on how effectively they can communicate with their readers and audiences. Newspapers like *The Daily Herald* disappeared because, in the end, they could not hold onto a big enough readership. *The Independent* has succeeded because it found a new and affluent readership. It relies on careful market research and communication with its readership to maintain its position. It was a carefully considered decision to include more comprehensive leisure and arts information than could be found in comparable papers. Its editor, Andreas Whittam Smith, maintains that such material has attracted a young and affluent readership, which is attractive to commercial advertisers. Finding out about readers' interests and needs is a vital method of keeping in touch with them and acts as a powerful influence on the paper's form and content.

If audiences become merely consumers, the danger is that the packages they buy do not give any health warnings about the ideas and values they contain. These values are not always obvious. They are not the result of a conspiracy to deceive for political or financial reasons. Reporting begins and ends with selection. The trouble with the media is that the selection is not arbitrary. It follows predictable patterns, which are based on the habits and interests of particular media. Selection cannot be avoided and is sometimes highly desirable. It is something we need to be wary of, but not cynical about. The media often present facts too neatly, so that the values and judgements they contain are not explicit. In trying to attract and satisfy audiences, simple story-forms have evolved as vehicles for information. This tendency to package information into stories is likely to increase.

Simon Bates' *Our Tune* on Radio 1 is an obvious example of this kind of development. Every weekday, for six or seven minutes, Simon Bates extemporises on a listener's letter. Each week he gets up to eight hundred of them from people willing to expose their personal stories anonymously to ten million listeners. He weaves the fragments of their lives into simple soap operettas. He dramatises a range of problems like alcoholism, bereavement, illegitimacy, homosexuality, chronic illness, drug abuse and death. It is a form of emotional massage which allows the release of sadness, resentment or joy in a pop song of their own choice. It is a form of entertainment packaged as a story for easy consumption. But exclusive concentration on personal experience across the media as a whole can mean that social contexts come to seem irrelevant. Individuals are seen in isolation, disconnected from social, political and economic causes and consequences. The problem is not that such stories are trivial, rather that they are personalised almost to the point of becoming meaningless. The consequence of allowing facts to be detached from their real contexts is that problems can be presented as insoluble and offered instead simply as material for audience consumption.

The 'bias against understanding' which Peter Jay and John Birt complained about in the mid-1970s in relation to television news was allegedly the result of a shallow treatment of issues and the separation of news from current affairs. Much of this has

since been remedied by deeper news coverage (especially by ITN for Channel 4) and integration of News and Current Affairs departments (as now at the BBC under John Birt). But the problems of how information is processed, packaged and perceived are not confined to news and are not specific to television. They are common to all the mass media and raise the question of how well-informed British audiences and readers are. Both the quantity of information the media offer and the quality of understanding they promote are at issue. As one researcher has put it:

"One of the pre-conditions of effective citizenship ... is that you have access to all the information and the whole range of arguments that you need in order to make rational political decisions ... If you have an information system that is tipped towards entertainment and also tipped towards consumerism ... then you are distorting the information base of the society and you are encouraging people to think of themselves primarily as consumers rather than as citizens."
[Graham Murdock, Centre for Mass Communication Research, speaking on *Understanding the Media* (R4)]

This distortion of society's information base offers a threat which is amply recognised by Cox. Media education is seen as a crucial element in providing strategic defences against it by "enlarg(ing) pupils' critical understanding of how messages are generated, conveyed and interpreted in different media" [9.2]. But it is also seen in a more positive and creative way as an aspect of personal and social development, since it deals with "fundamental aspects of language, interpretation and meaning" [9.9]. The notion of 'effective citizenship' put forward by Murdoch involves a high degree of autonomy and is rather different from the Government's own policies. Yet it is the ultimate aim of media education. It is now not only possible but necessary for English teachers (and any allies we can find) to work out what that means in practice.

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